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ABSTRACT

Negative influences on teaching practices and objectives in modern language programs, caused by certain final examination practices in Sweden, are pointed out and criticized in this paper. The needs of the Swedish student of languages are determined to be related to the use of language primarily as a means of everyday communication. The distinction between "speech" and "speaking" is made with the aid of several diagrams. The four skills of understanding, speaking, reading, and writing are seen to be closely interrelated. Of primary concern to the author is the nature of the present structure and scope of final examinations in language programs. He notes that translation skill as a general course objective has been largely abandoned and details reasons for this change in curricular planning. (RL)

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AIMS, TESTING AND EXAMINING IN MODERN LANGUAGE TEACHING.

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Slightly abridged version of a lecture given at the Council of Europe course on "Testing and Examining in Modern Language Teaching" at Ostia, Italy, in April 1966 by SVANTE HJELMSTRÖM.

To quote the experts on oral tests and examinations who met in Berlin in August 1964, "examinations should reflect and not dictate the way modern languages are taught". The report goes on to say: "Unfortunately, an examination which might begin today as a reflection of teaching, will tend inevitably to become the determining factor in subsequent teaching". This is a fair summary of experience in every country where foreign languages are taught. Sweden is certainly no exception. We have been revising our syllabi and improving our methods for several years with a view to giving students a better command of the spoken language. The standard has gone up a bit, but is not nearly as high as it could be and should be. There is no doubt that this is largely due to the nature of the final examinations. Now we have taken the consequences and have decided to abolish the final examinations system that is in use at

present. It is being replaced by another and more flexible system, which we hope will have a more wholesome influence on teaching.

Before deciding what kind of tests and examinations should be used in modern language teaching, it is necessary to define the aims. It is customary in this context to refer to the so-called "four skills" - listening, reading, speaking and writing. This is perhaps not the best approach to the problem. It seems more rational to try to find the answer to the following question: what are the future needs of the language learner ? Or, in other words, for what situations should he be equipped ?

First of all, he will meet people who speak the language in question. He will meet them abroad, on pleasure or business trips, and he will meet them at home as tourists or business representatives. We are all familiar with the tremendous expansion of activities that involve direct personal contact between people of different nationalities. There is every reason to expect and to hope that this trend will continue. Secondly a very large number of those who go to higher secondary schools will carry on their studies at universities and similar institutions or will get such employment as will necessitate further education in some special field. Those categories will be dependent on scientific literature in this or that foreign language. And this is particularly true if their mother tongue is not one of the widely used languages. For example a Swedish student of medicine, technology, psychology, etc. would simply have to do without certain essential knowledge if he could not read the appropriate literature in English or French.

Another practical need that is going to increase considerably, is that of being able to carry on a correspondence in one foreign language or other. It may be a personal correspondence in preparation for or as a consequence of a visit to another country, or a business correspondence. It might be argued that the technique of writing business letters is too specialized a subject to be dealt with in schools giving a general education. Naturally, there is no point in insisting on a whole school class learning some special terminology which only three percent of the pupils will ever need and which will probably be partly out of date when they are to make practical use of their knowledge. On the other hand, the modern business letter is a far cry from the stiff and stilted style of the past. The ability to express their ideas plainly and clearly and in the right tone will be of essential value to all students in business or personal correspondence.

Our language learner will also want to benefit as much as possible from what is offered by television, radio, film, theatre. Obviously it should be one of the important aims of modern language teaching to enable the learner to get a maximum of pleasure, information, education, from the ever increasing output of these mass media.

There is one kind of situation which may arise and has to be considered: the language learner may in future be called upon to assist people who do not speak the language in question; in other words to act as an interpreter or translator. Some people say that this is an every-day occurrence and use it in defence of translation practice in school. As I see it, there are at least two answers to this argument. Firstly, it is very rare that an exact word-for-word translation is required. Let us say you have a guest from abroad who does not understand your language. At breakfast, you discover some important international news in the paper. Now of course you do not attempt a literal translation, because even if you are quite good at translating, the process would be so slow that it would mean exposing your guest to a kind of intellectual torture. The only rational thing to do is to give a summary in your own words. Secondly, translation is by far the most difficult of all language skills, or, perhaps it would be more correct to say, it is the only difficult language skill. It requires a high intelligence and years and years of intense special training, and is completely beyond the scope

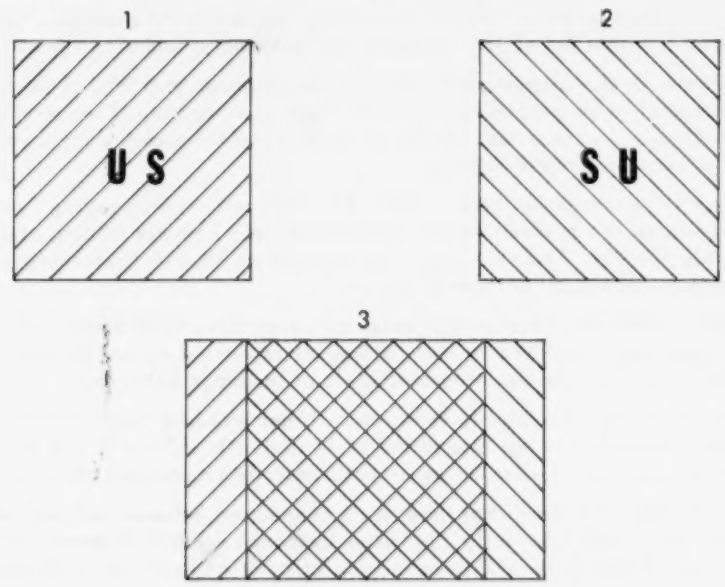
of general school education. Look at the tests used for school leaving examinations all over Europe. The language is always carefully simplified and adjusted to the students' level of expression. You can spot translation texts a mile off. They have nothing to do with real life.

Before I go on I should like to sum up what I have been saying about the different needs of the language learner, ranking them according to importance. The student will want to use the language as a means of communication in four types of situation:

1) meeting people who speak the language; that means using the language for two-way communication;
2) using literature in the language for study purposes; one-way communication. This includes of course such reading as is done by students who study the foreign language itself at university level;
3) corresponding in the language; two-way communication, and
4) understanding film, TV, radio, theatre; one-way communication.

If we are successful in our endeavour to equip the students with such language ability as will satisfy these needs, the effect of the teaching will also fill the overall purpose of modern language teaching: it will further international understanding by giving the individual an insight into the culture and civilization of other peoples, and this insight will, in turn, be a valuable factor in character development and an inexhaustible source of personal enrichment.

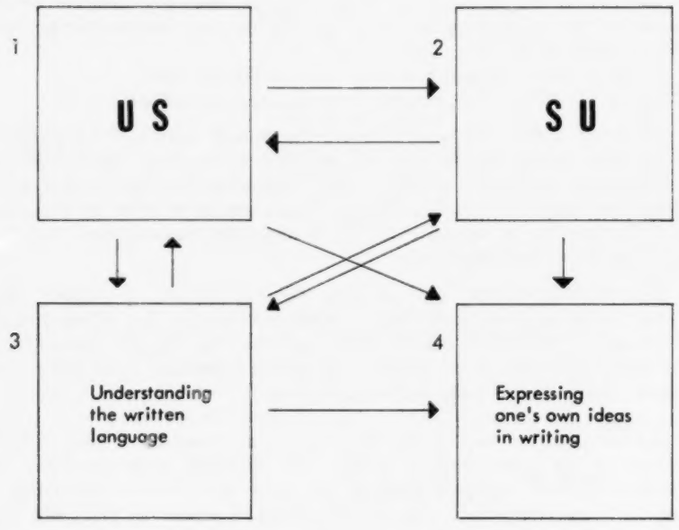
I already said that we cannot now go into the techniques of modern language teaching, but we have got to have them in mind and I should like to say a few words about the principles on which modern language teaching should be based. First and foremost is speech. The definition of speech as **verbal behaviour** is no doubt accepted by all modern linguists. Somebody wrote: "Language is something that happens, wo do not produce language, we live it". As a rule, our speech is caused by what is happening to us, and conversation may be described as a chain reaction. It then follows that it is unnatural to list understanding speech and speaking understandably as two separate skills. They are integral parts of the same skill, and in a language course they belong intimately together. One might perhaps illustrate the principle like this:



US is short for Understanding Speech, and SU is Speaking Understandably. Now what happens in reality is not that they are unconnected skills, but rather interrelated as in fig. 3.

The left section of fig. 3 symbolises the one-way communication situation when you listen to the radio, you see films, etc. The middle section is the main area where language functions, and the right section is the rather infrequent occasion when speaking language understandably is used as a means of one-way communication.

Now I should like to change the diagram a little - purely for practical purposes.



The arrows at the top mean that by increasing the ability to understand speech we automatically increase the ability to speak understandably, and vice versa.

However, there is also understanding the written language and this, of course, is influenced favourably by practising 1 and 2. Again, of course, if we read a lot, we also automatically increase our faculty to understand the spoken language and also to speak the language understandably.

There is one more dimension here, number 4. I shall refrain from saying "writing the language" because this so often means "translating" and I am **not** talking about translation in this context. And here again (4th square) we have a favourable influence from the increase of the other three skills.

As you see, we have the "four skills" here, only they have been dressed up a bit and above all, they are presented in such a way as to remind us that they are not four isolated activities, but closely integrated forms of language behaviour.

It is to be noted that the ability to translate is **not** included here. The reason is, of course, that translation is not one of the basic linguistic skills - it is a sort of sidetrack leading away from the activities we have described as natural verbal behaviour.

However, this does not mean that there is no connection between natural verbal behaviour and translation. Obviously, the better someone's general command of a language is, the less difficulty he will have in translating or interpreting. I remember some

classes I taught English and German several years ago. I was getting more and more disgusted with doing the translation work that I had been told was necessary as a preparation for the final examination. So gradually, and with a bad conscience to start with, I cut down translation practice until finally it disappeared altogether.

The time gained was used for different oral exercises, "explication de texte", definitions of words and phrases, etc. Those pupils did their final tests, which were translation pieces, rather better than previous classes who had been doing a lot of translation drill. My conclusion was that what they lost on the translation swing they gained, with a good margin, on the sensible language roundabout.

We now come to "Testing and Examining" in modern language teaching. It follows from what I have already said that there are two main principles that should be applied.

Firstly, an examination system must be based on an analysis of the aims of modern language teaching.

Secondly, as an examination system tends to influence teaching methods it must be devised so as to influence them in a way that the aims are achieved. When it comes to working out adequate tests, we can use the same diagram - we just alter the terms.

	Perception	Production
The spoken language	Auditive (Listening comprehension test)	Oral (Oral production test)
The written language	Visual (Reading comprehension test)	Written (Composition. Word knowledge test. Structure test)

Ideally, a battery of language tests should cover all the four squares, if it is to be an adequate instrument for the assessment of the students' command of the language. However, if the teaching has been done strictly according to the principles I mentioned earlier, there will be a very high correlation between the results of different tests and it will not matter much if the test battery is not complete. In Sweden we have constructed a set of tests covering three of these squares (i.e. auditive perception, visual perception and written production), and we are experimenting with oral production tests. Even if we feel reasonably sure that the existing tests will give us a good overall picture of the students' ability to use the language, we consider it highly desirable to introduce oral production tests because of the wholesome effect this will have on teaching. Someone has said, "The only way of giving speech parity of esteem is by testing it".

A test battery has got to be highly reliable, of course. For most of the tests we are going to use in the new higher secondary school - the so-called **gymnasium** - we have well-known evaluation techniques, that is, we are using the objective techniques of the multiple choice test.

We are deliberately leaving out translation, for four reasons (I have mentioned two of them already):

1. The average student will have very little use for an ability to translate.

2. Translation is such a difficult job that if we were to include it we should be turning out a vast majority (perhaps 99%) of totally useless translators.

3. Translation calls for text comprehension, word knowledge, command of structures and idioms - well, all these dimensions are covered by the test battery I have described. So a translation test would not tell us anything more about the students' command of the foreign language. In fact, it would probably give us an incorrect picture.

4. Translation practice is directly detrimental to the natural process of acquiring good speech habits. I will take just one example to illustrate this fundamental fact: in Sweden, where all children - even the slow learners - are taught English from their tenth year, it is quite easy to teach a whole class of 11 or 12 year-olds structures like "He wants you to get him a newspaper". After enough practice even the slow learners will produce such sentences in the right context. That is, on this particular point they know as much English as the English themselves.

   But if you then give the class the equivalent Swedish sentence to translate, at least 60% of them will produce contorted versions like: "He wants that you will/shall get . . . . "

A translation test is a long series of pitfalls, and the sensible modern language teacher carefully avoids all comparisons between the mother tongue and the target language. This principle applies to all stages of language learning up to university level, if not further.

In the case of oral production and written composition, we have to rely on subjective assessment, but by using a team of examiners, say three to four, for the assessment of each piece of production, written or oral, the subjective factor can be reduced to a minimum. This is facilitated considerably by the nature of the task set. The pupils are given the topic and get some clues to help them get started and carry out the task. This means that the judging team can concentrate on qualitative differences between the results. Deviations as to formal content will be small and thus rather insignificant from the point of view of evaluation.

Finally, it ought to be pointed out that the kind of language testing I have described is just one part of the overall evaluation of the pupil's standard. In Sweden we are spreading achievement tests for different subjects over the last two years of higher secondary education, thereby avoiding a concentrated examination at the end, which often means rather a dramatic point in the student's life. This means that the test can also be used as an important diagnostic device and thus be an integral part of the teaching system.